INTRODUCTION

LOCAL UNIONS IN THE POST–WORLD WAR II DECADES

This book is as much an outgrowth of years of rank-and-file union activism as it is the result of academic curiosity. My interest in organized labour began when I first became a union member through summer employment at a gas utility in St. Catharines, Ontario. I became aware of Local 27 of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW; formerly the United Auto Workers [UAW]) when I found work at another gas utility in London, Ontario, and joined a comparatively small Communication, Energy, and Paperworkers Union (CEP) local with barely one hundred members. That local rented the Local 27 hall for its monthly meetings. I sat in the hall as a visitor, anecdotally learning some aspects of its past. My academic interest in organized labour was piqued as an undergraduate student and has not abated since. Having been a rank-and-file member of a large Canadian industrial union, as well as a local officer, I spent years reading about and considering the meaning of unions.

A growing body of scholarship has established that the working-class experience in Canada underwent some profound changes in the half century after World War II. In the 1950s and 1960s, real wages rose, hours of work were reduced, and increased disposable income allowed more formal schooling for children and a much higher level of expenditures on cars, suburban homes, and other consumer goods; at the same time, state social-security measures brought some protection against unemployment, illness, and old age. The workforce experiencing these changes was also undergoing transformations that brought more women and new immigrant groups into the labour market. Roughly a third of workers
— historically, a huge increase in the proportion of the workforce — confronted those changes as union members. This book addresses the role of one local union within these developments.

Among the many changes that the postwar period brought to the working class was a new legal framework for peacetime labour-management relations. This framework took shape in the immediate postwar years, especially with the adoption of laws like the federal *Industrial Relations and Disputes Investigation Act (IRDIA)* and its provincial counterparts. Canadian industrial workers joined unions, many of which were affiliates of the American Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and, after 1955, the unified AFL-CIO. Those unions — especially the UAW — pursued bargaining agendas that improved workers’ standards of living. Canadian unions tried to influence foreign policy in various ways, one of which was to forge links with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the New Democratic Party (NDP) at the national and provincial levels. Unions sought to represent their members in the workplace while also articulating a wider social and political agenda.

The labour movement’s importance in working-class life has drawn considerable scholarly attention. The resulting research — concentrated on national unions, anti-Communism, state policy, and issues surrounding collective bargaining — has revealed much about the nature of unions and working-class life in postwar Canada. More specifically, the UAW, which is central to this study, has been the focus of much analysis in both Canada and the United States.¹ This union, one of the products of the CIO’s creation in 1934, helped shape a working-class political agenda in the postwar years.² It sought not only to play a central role in its members’ lives, including those in Canada, during those years, but also to exert close administrative and political control over local affairs.

Unions’ political agendas in the postwar period reflected divergent ideologies and party politics, all of which were situated at different points on the Left of the political spectrum. The UAW included leftists who would have preferred that their union and the rest of the North American labour movement pursue a more progressive political agenda, especially objectives to which they had been exposed through contact with Communist
parties in Canada and the United States. The UAW international administration, under long-serving international president Walter Reuther, was committed to anti-Communism in both Canada and the United States even though leftists were instrumental in helping to build unions, particularly at the local level. It is almost impossible to discuss the UAW in the postwar decades without considering Reuther and the people whom he appointed to staff positions across the UAW. Efforts were made in the late 1940s to root out suspected leftist sympathizers, and people such as future Canadian UAW leader George Burt narrowly avoided expulsion. The Left caucus in the UAW in Canada was able to endure longer than its American counterpart, but only with great difficulty.

Unions concentrated on helping workers through the collective bargaining process. As noted in the American context, the UAW’s bargaining program was predicated on “a prosperous industry, on competition for market share among the [auto] manufacturers, and on union dominance of the labour market.” The UAW, through its bargaining agenda, articulated a provider role for itself with respect to its members during their working lives and through their retirement years. Economic measures dominated collective bargaining: for example, pension plans became an important bargaining objective in both Canada and the United States, as did inflation protection in the form of cost-of-living allowances (known as COLA). First adopted in American UAW collective agreements in 1948, COLA was bargained in Canada in 1950. COLA, along with the annual improvement factor (AIF) had “a stabilizing effect on union-management relations and constituted the first steps in the construction of Fordist wage relations.”

Many analyses of organized labour’s development in the post–World War II decades focus on the idea of a postwar settlement or compromise between employers and unions. The postwar settlement is conceptualized as organized labour trading the unfettered right to challenge management, including the right to engage in spontaneous strikes, in return for the right to legal collective bargaining and better economic rewards. Industrial relations practitioners and labour historians view the post-war period in different terms. The former argue that the postwar labour
relations system represented a form of industrial democracy, while the latter often take the view that it was a co-optation of workers’ interests. Recent research, such as work by Jane Poulsen, suggests that relations between unions and employers depended on the industry in which they operated and the time period in question. My study, as it pertains to interaction between Local 27 and the employers with which it bargained, will also suggest that the labour relations process was not completely uniform.9

Discussions of the postwar settlement often focus on Fordism, which in turn is sometimes used in discussions of industrial pluralism. Fordism, a term with a range of definitions, shaped wage relations but was also influenced by unions and their members in other ways. Bryan Palmer suggests that Fordism included high wages, mass production, increased leisure time, and the “conscious structuring by capital of labour into a republic of consumption.”10 Julie Guard, on the other hand, emphasizes that the postwar system was primarily about enhancing the masculinity of male workers.11 Therefore, while consumerism was an important part of the postwar system, gender also played a central role.

Unions like the UAW eventually abandoned efforts to exert control over the work process through collective bargaining, in exchange for annual wage increases, COLA, pension plans, and other economic rewards. This shift in policy direction — which Peter McInnis calls a “Faustian bargain”12 — was charted by union leaders such as Reuther, and it helped fuel the consumerism described by Palmer. Leo Panitch and Don Swartz suggest that the postwar labour relations framework ushered in “an era of free collective bargaining” that came under assault in the early 1970s; their analysis supports McInnis’s view, since they further note that “the trade unionism which developed in Canada in the postwar years bore all the signs of the web of legal restrictions which enveloped it.”13 Michael Burawoy describes the postwar workplace as one in which a worker became “a citizen in an internal industrial state” and suggests that efforts were made to shape workers into good citizens in that state.14

Analyses of the meaning of the postwar settlement, and Fordism, have thus been done within a range and combination of perspectives,
from gender to economics. Workers became consumers but were different by gender. They enjoyed legal collective bargaining rights but also faced legal restrictions on how those rights could be exercised. The existing research thus collectively suggests that the postwar settlement and its associated elements, like Fordism, brought both gains and losses for workers and their unions.

Evaluating Fordism’s influence on the postwar autoworkers’ union is further complicated by contrasts between Canada and the United States. The UAW certainly pursued economic objectives associated with Fordism in both countries. Governments in both Canada and the United States concluded the Auto Pact, an agreement that obliged the Detroit automakers to build as many cars in Canada as they sold. But in some respects, state responses to organized labour were different in the two countries. In the United States, government policy came down hard on labour militancy, notably in the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, and the postwar system essentially unravelled until labour ceased to be a countervailing social force. In contrast, the Canadian state did not implement such overtly anti-union laws in the immediate postwar years.

The post–World War II labour movement, in particular the UAW, appears to have often been driven by priorities set by its national and international offices. Fordism, in its various forms, influenced and shaped union policy. The union accepted greater economic gains at the bargaining table in return for leaving management free to run corporations without direct interference from labour. The UAW leadership pursued a political program that was linked to its overall economic program and strove to quell dissent with the broader structure. In disciplining the members to accept the “Fordist regime,” people like Reuther became “managers of discontent” among their rank-and-file members.

Academics have engaged in spirited debate over the meaning of the UAW’s program and its impact on workers and working-class life. The agendas and activities of national and international union offices, however, should not be considered the sum total of what unions actually did in the postwar years; the internal operations of union locals in this period played a critical role as well, but have received little scholarly attention,
Local unions have most often been seen as part of national and international union structures through purges of progressives or compulsion to accept wider union bargaining priorities. Like their parent unions, they have been described as riven by internal political squabbling, with Left caucuses frequently succumbing to social democratic groups. Some independent local unions have been studied, as have some locals in relation to the workplaces that they organized.

Despite existing analyses of union locals, which show the complexity of union membership and the important role that a local played in working-class life, the union local has not received adequate attention as a key agency for the organized working class in Canada as it sought to create a new place for itself in post–World War II Canadian communities. This book makes the case that the union local, as an institution of working-class organization, was central to new directions for working-class life in the postwar period. It also suggests that examining the role of local unions in the labour relations framework will lead to a more nuanced understanding of the postwar settlement than can be provided by Left, social democratic, or liberal analyses based solely on the behaviour at the top of unions.

National and international unions were, in many ways, the sum of their local unions. Workers who joined the UAW, and later the CAW, became members of a local chartered by the national, not direct members of the national; the local union was consequently their point of contact with the larger organization and their principal bargaining representative. Union locals, dependent on a core group of committed volunteer activists to sustain them, thus formed the basis of the postwar labour movement. This same group of activists worked to rally rank-and-file members and attempted to make the local a larger presence in workers’ lives by promoting social and political agendas outside of the workplace. The union local, then, though grounded in the workplace, also strove to shape working-class life beyond the factory floor.

Research on the post–World War II labour movement has frequently focused on the difference between social unionism and business unionism,
and on the objectives that unions pursued in the wider community. Stephanie Ross provides a useful definition of social unionism in her analysis of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) when she suggests that it is a form of unionism “in which unions struggle for the interests not only of their immediate membership but also the broader working class.” Pradeep Kumar provides a fairly clear description of both approaches: social unionism, he says, is based on a collectivist view of society and views the labour movement as a force for improving the lives of all workers while business unionism emphasizes economic, or “bread and butter” issues. But, as Ross notes, “social unionism’s precise meaning and implications remain vague for unionists and academicians.”

An institutional approach that focuses on themes like politics, collective bargaining, the role of the state, and the influence of national and international union leaders forms part of the analysis in this book but does not in itself sufficiently describe the nature of organized labour in the postwar period. The challenge is to integrate with such a focus the social historian’s concerns about issues like gender, class, ethnicity, race, and community. Research on labour in Canada and the United States in earlier periods points to how this can be accomplished. Analyses of workers’ movements from antebellum New York City to the Knights of Labour in Canada and of the various movements that collectively struggled through the “workers’ revolt” of 1917–25 all point to how social history can blend with institutional analysis to reveal greater insights into the nature of organized working-class life in a given period.

This study of UAW/CAW Local 27 combines social and institutional methodologies in order to reveal how the local operated in a range of spheres, from the workplace, to the union hall, to the family household. Gender and ethnicity influenced the development of local unions. Family economics also played a role, as did the changing communities in which they were situated: the unionized working class participated in an expanding consumer culture in the postwar years that influenced its economic aspirations. Working-class leisure expanded, including organized sports, and alcohol continued to be a part of time away from work. However, working-class leisure assumed different forms, depending in part on the
types of bonds that formed: for example, immigrants who joined local
unions formed family ties that were often closer than ties to either the
workplace or a union. All of these factors must therefore form part of
this broader analysis.

Why choose a comparatively unknown local in a mid-sized southern
Ontario city that is known more for a research university and the insur-
ance industry than for its labour history? Local 27 was the most prominent
industrial local union in London in the postwar decades, and examining
its history affords an opportunity to see how a local dealt with a broad
range of industrial employers and a large rank-and-file membership.
Its diversity was part of its uniqueness: it was the One Big Union that
organized workers in diverse occupations across a range of industrial
workplaces, from locomotive assembly to envelope manufacturing. It
included workplaces with hundreds of workers and others with less than
twenty. It was thus unlike larger UAW/CAW locals in the postwar period,
such as Local 222 in Oshawa, Ontario, which overwhelmingly represented
workers in automotive assembly. The local’s founding was initiated by
the UAW Canadian office, but Local 27 leaders and rank-and-file mem-
bers exercised a great deal of autonomy within the larger national and
international structure, and within broader union bargaining objectives.
Furthermore, the community in which Local 27 was founded — Lon-
don, Ontario — has not been the subject of much scrutiny by academic
labour historians. I hope that this study will stimulate further research
on labour in that city.

Local 27 was not representative of all local unions in Canada in the
postwar decades: its size and the range of workplaces that it organized
distinguished it from smaller locals or those concentrated in one work-
place. Moreover, no two locals were the same. As two prominent former
CAW activists noted in an interview for this study, even the automotive
assembly locals were different from each other. The issues and challenges
that union activists and members in this local faced, however, were similar
to those confronting the unionized parts of the working class in Canada
from the 1950s to the 1980s.
Overview of the Book

The period from 1950 to 1990 began with the local’s founding and ended during a time when both Local 27 and the broader CAW were strong. To have extended this study beyond 1990 would have risked losing the perspective that only time can provide. Local 27’s story is told over eight chapters that explore specific themes. Chapter 1 addresses the founding of the local and the major influences on its subsequent development, including the role of women and immigrants, internal dissent, and the core group of activists. This narrative also considers the role of activists and internal political differences within the local, and the creation of Local 27’s internal communications, particularly the Local 27 News.

Chapter 2 focuses on the local’s interaction with the UAW and CAW national and international offices. I review the role of staff representatives and of the UAW Canadian office in the local’s development, as well as the importance of union education programs. This chapter also examines Local 27 support of broader union policy positions and assesses the extent to which the local became bureaucratized in the postwar decades.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the addition of new bargaining units, employer opposition, and the response of London’s workers to Local 27. This chapter also provides an overview of the workplaces organized by Local 27, including their products, location, ownership, and size. I analyze aspects of technological change in the workplace, such as Fordism, as well as industrialization and de-industrialization.

Chapter 4 explores how Local 27 approached collective bargaining, focusing on the collective agreements negotiated by the local and the differences among those agreements. Local 27’s size and the number of bargaining units that it organized meant that it negotiated many more collective agreements than were bargained by a local that only negotiated with one or two employers. Good wages and benefits were an essential part of advancing the aspirations of working-class families; in this chapter, I review the tangible impacts of COLA clauses, pensions, and other paid benefits.

Chapter 5 considers how the labour relations process worked once a workplace was organized and a collective agreement was in place. It
reveals how Local 27 moved through the labour relations process — more specifically, to what extent it responded to employer actions as opposed to shaping a workplace agenda. Collective agreements, grievances, and arbitrations were key parts of the labour relations process, but this chapter also looks at labour relations away from the bargaining table.

Chapter 6 explores the attempts of Local 27’s core group of leaders and activists to rally a large group of rank-and-file members around a social and recreational program centred in the local’s hall. Local 27 members were spread across a range of bargaining units. What efforts were made to engage them in a social sphere in the local’s own meeting hall and around a social agenda in the London community? I describe how such programs as sports teams, specialized committees, and family events were created. I also show how the local’s social programs were sustained by the Local 27 News and how the union culture connected to the wider cultural patterns of working-class life in the city, including consumerist leisure outlets. The roles of women and of non-English-speaking workers in the local’s social sphere constitute an important part of the analysis.

Chapter 7 examines Local 27’s efforts to engage in electoral politics in London, Ontario. The community agenda that the local attempted to promote among its members looked outward, toward broader social and political objectives. Pursuing a political program through an alliance with the New Democratic Party (NDP) was key to meeting these objectives, as was involvement with the London and District Labour Council (hereafter the London Labour Council). This chapter discusses the ongoing role of a core group of activists in the local’s political efforts and assesses the effectiveness of those efforts.

Chapter 8 considers how local leaders, and the national representatives who worked with them, responded to the economic concerns of workers’ families. It determines whether those efforts bore tangible results. Fordism returns to the narrative, as does working-class family life in postwar London and how Local 27 fit into it. Workplaces changed from 1950 to 1990, as did families. Birth rates shifted, divorce law and rates changed, and more women entered the full-time workforce. Working-class men
still strove to conform to the breadwinner role, but married women also became regular wage earners and sometimes the principal breadwinners in their families. This chapter emphasizes the importance of understanding what workers and their families wanted when assessing the role of the local union in the postwar decades.

Working-class families aspired to owning the two major items that were available in postwar consumer culture: homes and automobiles.\textsuperscript{35} The state played an active role in helping to finance home purchases in the postwar years, and working-class families took advantage of such programs.\textsuperscript{36} In general, the final chapter considers how the union helped working-class families achieve their goals, but it also reviews the limitations on what the local could accomplish for its members and their families.

**Researching a Postwar Local Union**

This book draws on a range of sources. Union records were, of course, a critically important resource. Activists in the Canadian labour movement who have had the chance to interact with the CAW know that its members, both locally and nationally, take great pride in their union’s history and have worked to preserve it through archival donations. Local 27 is no exception. This study would not have been possible without access to the UAW Region 7 and UAW Local 27 collections at the Archive of Labour and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University. The CAW national librarian also facilitated access to the CAW fonds at Library and Archives Canada. The large collection of Local 27 collective agreements at Library and Archives Canada and the Archives of Ontario were also crucial to my research.

Although public archival holdings were indispensable, access to often unorganized personal collections of documents was invaluable as well. For instance, the only available Kelvinator of Canada collective agreements are carefully kept by a former employee who now resides in Strathroy, Ontario. Similarly, a revealing collection of documents on a decertification campaign at Kelvinator are proudly stored in the east London basement of the man who led the decertification drive. Local 27
has also kept a valuable collection of documents in London, including photos and local newspapers, that added immeasurably to my analysis.

To supplement these written sources, I have relied extensively on oral history. Thirty-two current and former members of Local 27, and other people who had some links to it, agreed to sit and reflect on the local’s activities and impacts from 1950 to 1990. Indeed, three of them did so more than once. Their personal recollections added meaning to the archival documents. Those people, some of whom had not been Local 27 members for many years, were mostly found through word-of-mouth contact. I was a visitor at two meetings of the Local 27 retirees’ chapter, but making connections through interviews proved even more effective. Some interviewees, however, were not accessible through the local itself. Since none of the former employees of London’s Kelvinator plant were still connected to the local because their bargaining unit ceased to operate in 1969, I reached them through a person-to-person advertisement in a free community newspaper called The Londoner.

Many interviewees were quite elderly and had to be reached as quickly as possible. Their recollections were invaluable, sometimes including detailed memories of events and always indicating the meaning and importance of what they experienced as members of the local, or through contact with it. Some interviews only lasted about half an hour, but three people were interviewed twice for much lengthier discussions. Older interviewees, especially those over eighty, were more likely to remember Local 27 in thematic terms than in detailed recollections.

Most of the interviewees were, or had been, volunteer activists. Thus, although they worked in businesses organized by Local 27, their memories were not necessarily representative of average rank-and-file members who were not particularly active in union affairs. They shared common hopes and aspirations with those members, but they made the union a more central part of their lives. Oral narratives such as those used for this book are consequently not perfect records of what happened in Local 27 between 1950 and 1990.37

At the same time, without oral histories, themes like women’s activism, the Left caucus, and the full role of national representatives in
founding and shaping Local 27 would never have been revealed. Sources like the *London Free Press*, which is frequently cited in this study, also had inherent biases. The *Free Press* was owned by a prominent London, Ontario, family; although it usually promoted industry and business, it was at times sympathetic towards organized labour. The various sources cited herein thus provide a range of different perspectives on how Local 27 developed.

Initially founded by the UAW, Local 27 was chiefly the result of efforts by local leaders and activists to build a strong union and to use it on behalf of its working-class members. The local proved to be an effective agent of change, even though it was often forced to respond to pressure from employers in the workplace. It operated within clear limits, only truly representing all of its membership when actually operating in the workplace. Its agenda beyond the workplace, while ostensibly representative of all members, in reality engaged the same core group of white, male, Anglo-Canadian activists who led union efforts through collective bargaining. The local represented a wide array of workplaces, and thus was unlike other large industrial local unions, many of which only organized one principal bargaining unit. Despite this uniqueness, Local 27’s founding and subsequent development reveals much about how a local union operated in the postwar decades.